



Observer Corps Report

Observer: Tanya Phillips

Meeting Observed: Knox County Commission

Meeting Date: 02.25.26

Agenda: [Knox County Commission Agenda 02.25.26](#)

Video Recording: [Knox County Commission Recording](#)

Three Main Observations:

1. Commissioner Fox gave a 30-minute presentation on "A Christian's Biblical View of Immigration" to oppose public comments made in a prior meeting where citizens quoted Bible scripture in support of the immigrant community, and his presentation was made to refute those claims. He said America is a Christian Nation and America is for Americans. During the public forum, each person is given 3 minutes to speak, and there were twenty-four people who addressed Commissioner Fox's presentation and his withdrawn resolution, [R-26-2-903](#), that encouraged the Sheriff's office to expand their collaboration with ICE under the 287(g) model. Thirteen people were opposed, and eleven, many of whom were residents of his district, were in support.
2. Ordinance [O-26-2-101](#) passed the 1st reading. This ordinance transfers control and supervision of the East Tennessee Juvenile Service Center under the Knox County Juvenile Court Judge, Tim Irwin, and creates a seven-member advisory board. If passed on the 2nd reading in March, it would repeal a section of the previous ordinance that placed the responsibility of the center under the Sheriff's office. The vote was 8-1, with Commissioner Lee voting no and Commissioners Russel and Fox abstaining.
3. Ordinance [O-26-2-102](#) entitled "Recognition of Right to Self-Defense on Knox County-Owned Property" (sponsored by Commissioner Fox) was postponed for 60 days when several commissioners and the Deputy Law Director expressed concerns over the penalties and enforcement language. The ordinance pertains to requirements on posted notices for enhanced or concealed handgun carry permits on Knox County property.

Feature Evaluated	Yes	No	Comments
Meeting started on time?	X		Started at 5:00; ended at 9:40
All members present?	X		Dr. Jon Rysewyk, Superintendent of Knox County Schools, was in the audience. Commissioner Fox was not present during the devotional given by Dr. Khalid Shahu. Commissioners Durrett and Rawls stepped out of the room during most of Commissioner Fox's presentation.
Members attentive?	X		
Did members come prepared to discuss agenda items?	For most agenda items		Chair Oster asked Commissioner Fox for the answer to a question that came up in last week's agenda review on O-26-2-102 , and he had not followed-up to get the answer.
Agenda posted 72 hours prior to meeting?	X		
Agenda items clearly described what was to be discussed?	X		
Adequate opportunity given for public input?	X		26 people spoke in public forum for 3 minutes each. 13 spoke against and 11 in support of Commissioner Fox's presentation and his withdrawn 287(g) resolution. 2 people spoke on road issues.
Was there an appearance that some action items were discussed in closed rather than open session?		X	
Was background information available to the public?	X		
Facilities adequate (room size, lighting, ventilation, speakers, audible, ADA accessible)?	X		They are still working out a few kinks of the new electronic voting system. There were a few instances where technical assistance was required for several of the commissioners to complete the voting process, but the issues were resolved quickly.

Were there any issues on the agenda relevant to LWV positions or programs? View the League's [National](#), [State](#), and [LWVKKC](#) policy positions.

LWVKKC Policy Positions: *Childcare, Land Use, Health, Homeless/Mentally Ill Persons, Urban Forestry, Use of School Facilities by Communities, Teacher Recruitment & Retention*

League Position	Issue
Juvenile Justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • O-26-2-101 – repeal a section of Knox County code pertaining to the operation of East Tennessee Regional Juvenile Service Center and adopting a new section to place control and supervision of the Juvenile Service Center under the Knox County Juvenile Court Judge and to create an Advisory Board. • There was a unanimous vote of the temporary oversight board to bring this ordinance before the Commission to change from the previous model that had responsibility under the Knox County Sheriff’s Office (KCSO). • The board reached out to the sheriff candidates to determine their willingness to take this on, and it was determined that a different long-term solution was needed given the transition this year to a new sheriff, as a result, they are requesting to move the center under Knox County Juvenile Court Judge, Tim Irwin. • The center has received its licensing from the state for the first time in 3 years. • 87% of the CTAS recommendations have been accomplished, and most of the remaining requests are capital needs. The Governor has put \$20MM in his budget to be split between this center and another one in West TN. • The 7-member Advisory Board is made up of two members appointed by the mayor with at least one of whom is a rep from the Health Department, one Commissioner appointed by the Commission Chair, and four members appointed by the judge. • A substitute motion by Commissioner Russell to change makeup of the board to two appointed by the mayor and five elected by the full Commission failed. The vote was 3-8 with Commissioners Russell, Lee, and Fox voting yes. • Commissioner Lee was in support of the sheriff model, and she disagrees with how the advisory board is setup and can’t support the ordinance even though she voted for bringing the ordinance to the Commission during the board meeting. • Commissioner Fox made a substitute motion to take one of the appointees from the mayor and create another commissioner member and to update the two Commissioner appointees to be elected by the full Commission instead of appointed by the Chair. The motion failed 3-8 with Commissioners Fox, Lee, and Russell voting yes. • Commissioner Jay made a motion to update the language to state that the member appointments to the Advisory Board are to be “confirmed” by Knox County Commission. The ordinance passed with a vote of 8-1 with Commissioner Lee voting no and Commissioners Russell and Fox abstaining. • If the ordinance passes the 2nd reading in March, the center will go under the supervision of the Juvenile Court Judge on April 1st and the current temporary board would conclude business at their March meeting.

Do you recommend League action on any of these issues?

Other notes/concerns?

- A high school student spoke on the state of Knox County roads. He said they are subpar, and the County is failing to fill the many potholes. He proposed these policy changes: fill potholes within 48 hours of notification, automatically forward misdirected reports (potholes on city or state streets not

governed by the County), and a performance dashboard with a timeline of where the pothole is in the process.

- Presentation: “A Christian’s Biblical View of Illegal Immigration”
 - Commissioner Fox gave a 30-minute presentation to oppose public comments made in a prior meeting where citizens quoted Bible scripture in support of the immigrant community, and his presentation was made to refute those claims
 - Commissioners Durrett and Rawls were not present for most of the presentation.
 - The room was almost full. There were people against and in support of not only his presentation but also the resolution that he had withdrawn that encouraged the Sheriff’s office to increase their collaboration with ICE under the 287(g) model. Many people were holding signs showing support for the immigrant community.
 - Chair Oster told Commissioner Fox before the presentation started that he had 10 minutes, and about the 10-minute mark, she said he had 3 minutes left. He disagreed that she could limit his time; however, Law Director Moyers confirmed the amount of time given by any speaker is at the discretion of the Chair. Since Commissioner Fox said he would continue to come back each month until he was done, Chair Oster let him finish.
 - His message: even if illegal immigrants do not commit crimes, they are taking scarce resources from citizens and legal residents; illegal immigrants are not our neighbors; mercy, compassion, and justice should only be given to legal citizens; we should make it inhospitable for illegal immigrants to deter them from coming here; the Christian thing to do is to deport those here illegally; he believes the U.S. is a Christian nation; America is for Americans; he claimed the premise that illegal immigrants commit less crime is false; he showed mugshots of undocumented people and images of the citizens they had killed.
 - Twenty-four people were given 3 minutes each during public forum. Thirteen people were opposed, and eleven, many of whom were residents of his district, were in support.
 - The messages from those who were opposed: this presentation is not County business, and County time should not be used to cover it; we should not be discussing Christian principles in government meetings; the U.S. is not a Christian nation; many immigrants are Christians fleeing religious persecution; Knox County should not be working with ICE, no child should be denied an education; rights are given to all persons under the Constitution, which includes the undocumented; love your neighbor.
 - The messages from those in favor: The U.S. is a Christian nation; millions of criminals have been let into our country, and we need to know who they are; citizens are harmed when immigration laws are not enforced; compassion starts close and extends out as capacity allows; the primary responsibility of the country is to its legal citizens only; mass deportations is the policy of today, but the policy of tomorrow is remigration, God has established nations and borders and it’s not unjust to enforce those borders.
 - None of the Commissioners had a reaction to the speakers regardless of whether they were speaking in support or against, except for Commissioner Fox. You could tell if the person walking up to the podium was going to be in support based on his expression. He would smile and watch the person walk to the podium. As they spoke, he smiled, and nodded in agreement, and he clapped for many of them after they were done speaking.
- [O-26-2-102](#) – “Recognition of Right to Self-Defense on Knox County-owned Property” that is sponsored by Commissioner Fox was postponed for 60 days.
 - This ordinance was proposed because Commissioner Fox took issue with the East Tennessee Historical Society for incorrect signage that only quoted one of the two state statutes regarding handguns. During discussion, Commissioner Frazier confirmed that the Historical Society had rectified the issue after they were contacted by the Knox County Law Department.

- The ordinance will codify the penalties for Knox County or a “permittee” of Knox County if they violate state-mandated restrictions on possession of a handgun by an enhanced or concealed handgun carry permit holder and a previous policy enacted by Mayor Glenn Jacobs that allows possession of a handgun by an enhanced or concealed handgun carry permit holder while in a Knox County library. Any third-party lessee failing to comply will be fined \$500 per day. Any enhanced or conceal handgun carry permit holder who files a lawsuit for enforcement of this ordinance either Knox County or the third-party lessee will pay awarded attorney’s fees if they are found in violation.
- Several commissioners wanted to know if this was an isolated incident that may have been an oversight or is it a widespread issue. The Deputy Law Director wasn’t aware of any other instances.
- Commissioner Oster asked in last week’s agenda review meeting that Commissioner Fox provide the number of building impacted, but he was not only unable to provide that information but also called her question a “red herring” and said it doesn’t matter how many buildings we have when they should all comply with the law.
- Commissioner Jay asked Law Director Moyers if this was the only ordinance that included punitive damages, and he confirmed there are no other county ordinances that contain “fee shifting”.
- Commissioners Oster and Jay both said they were not in favor of this ordinance as-is since they prefer less government overreach and regulations.
- There was concern from several commissioner and the Deputy Law Director regarding not only the language around fines and the reimbursement of legal fees but also the lack of language around notification and enforcement. Although Commissioner Fox thought the language issue could be resolved during the meeting, a substitute motion was ultimately passed that postponed the ordinance for 60 days. The vote was 7-4 with Commissioners Jackson, Russell, Lee, and Fox voting no.